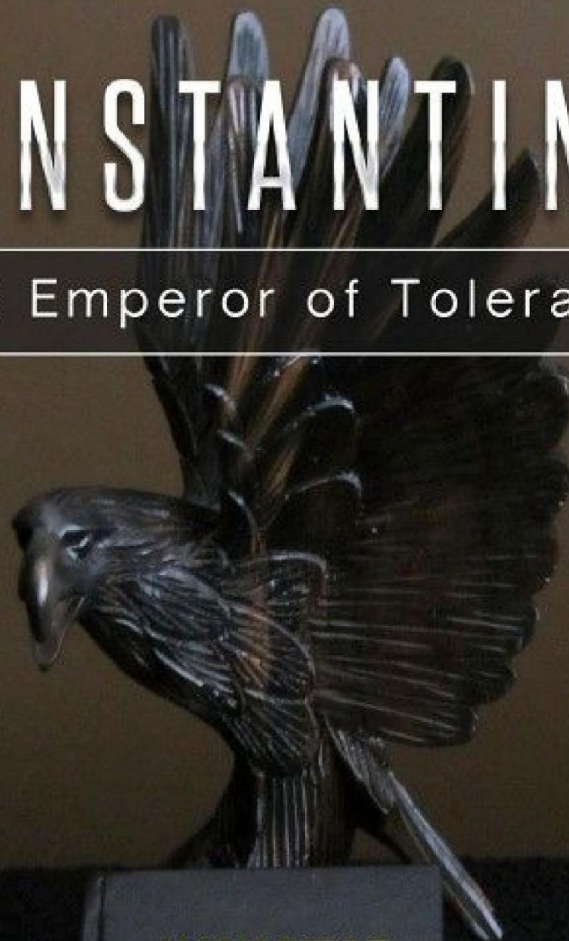


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The Emperor of Tolerance



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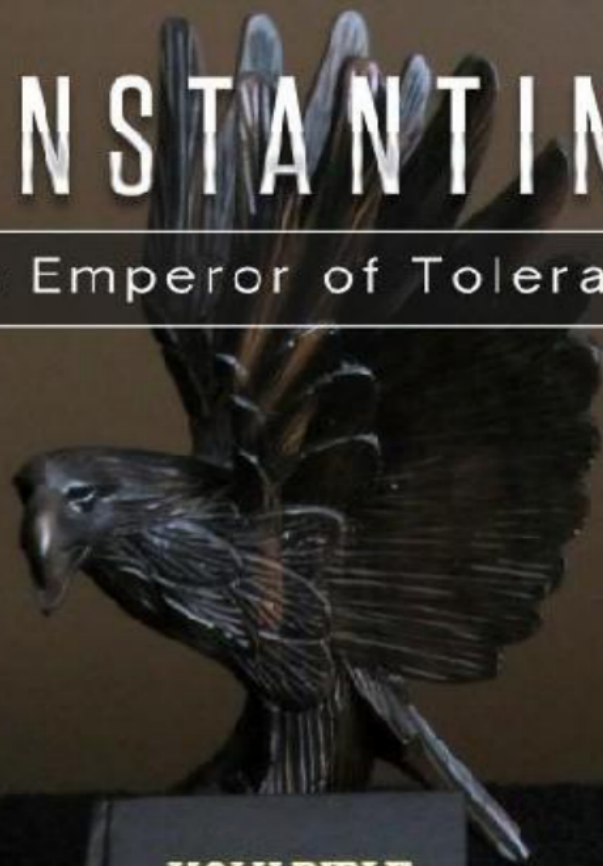
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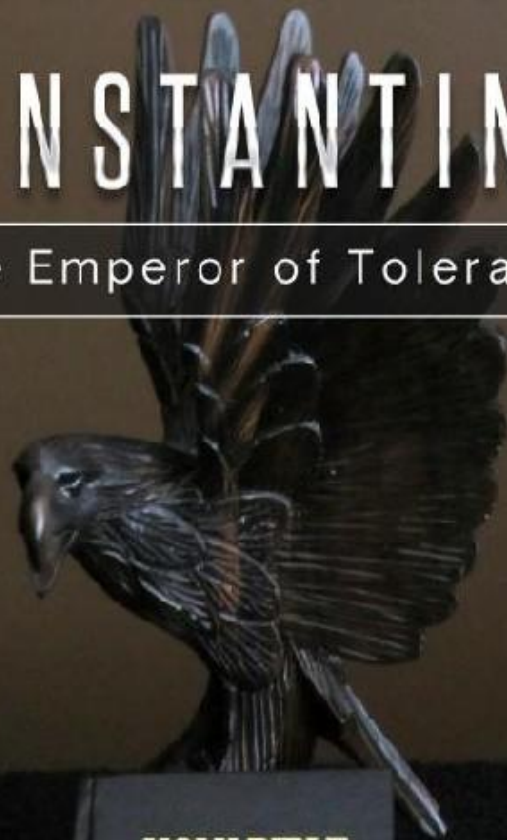


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Constantine: The Emperor of Widespread Tolerance and the Establishment of the New Byzantine State [1]

While many question the sincerity of Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 312 A.D., he brought stability to an Empire that had shifted leaders far too often in the period immediately preceding his reign. He accomplished this by pursuing a campaign including widespread toleration and freedom of religion. Paul Stephenson in his recent book, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor*, proved that Constantine's own personal beliefs allowed for a merger of paganism and Christianity and he eventually thought of himself as the mirror of his patron god, Jesus Christ. He was also deified by his men upon his death and buried in the center of the Twelve Apostles in the Church of the Holy Apostles. While it has been argued in the past that many of the laws passed by Constantine were in support of Christians, a closer analysis shows that very few of them harmed paganism in any significant way. As noted by Christopher Coleman in *Constantine the Great and Christianity*, the laws passed by Constantine established an era of tolerance that future Emperors were able to mimic in order to keep the Byzantine Empire stable with the notable exceptions of Julian and Theodosius. Using Stephenson, Coleman, and other primary and secondary sources, I intend to prove that Constantine's model of tolerance was what allowed the Byzantines to succeed, while wars usually resulted from any diversion from his model of tolerance. Drawing on a history of mystical worship of the Emperor, Constantine elevated himself to the level of a prophet (or second Christ) and created an Empire that was tolerant of both Christians and pagans which established a successful framework that the Byzantine Empire followed, with the exceptions of Julian and Theodosius, until the final sack of Constantinople in 1453.

Introduction

In the past, scholarship on Constantine and his Christian Byzantine Empire has been split. Some have held that Constantine was a sincere convert to Christianity and took an obscure religion and turned it into the dominating religious and political force in his Empire. Others have argued that his conversion to Christianity was never sincere and that he was secretly tied to paganism and the ancient idea of a Roman emperor. Recently, Paul Stephenson introduced a new idea that Christianity was already on the rise and that Constantine simply was in the right place at the right time. Drawing on a history of mythical worship of the Emperor, Constantine elevated himself to the level of a prophet (or second Christ) and created an Empire that was tolerant of both Christians and pagans which established a successful framework that the Byzantine Empire followed, with the exceptions of Julian and Theodosius, until the final sack of Constantinople in 1453.

After reviewing the historiography, I will move on to review the writings of Eusebius, the main primary sources that deal with the life of Constantine. While Eusebius may have been biased, as Bishop of Caesarea, I will show that his account leaves hints that Constantine allowed for pagans to continue in their worship. Eusebius also points out, albeit inadvertently, that Constantine had a self-aggrandizing tendency that will be demonstrated throughout this paper. From there I will move on to the rise of Christianity and the evolution of paganism around the time Constantine took power. I will give evidence that by the early 300's, paganism and Christianity had developed enough of a common background that elements of paganism had slipped into Christianity and Christian traditions were relatable to pagans. Next I will discuss the Council of Nicaea and its origins. I'll prove that Constantine saw himself as the head of the bishops and that he dealt harshly with heretics (or anyone that threatened him as head of the Christian church). I'll go on to review the laws passed by Constantine and demonstrate that none of them were specifically anti-pagan, while some laws benefited both Christians and pagans, and that Constantine allowed some pagan practices to remain legal. With Constantine's death, I will show that the rites of apotheosis were performed and that he was deified, a practice in place since the times of the early pagan Roman Emperors. I will then present the evidence that supports that Constantine, while a Christian, thought of himself as a prophet, seer, and even a second

Christ. Finally, I will review the two emperors who significantly diverged from the framework Constantine established and show how in each case (whether in favor of pagans or in favor of Christians) it was extremely detrimental to the Empire.

Historiography

Christopher Coleman in *Constantine the Great and Christianity* approaches the subject as one who saw Constantine as a sincere convert and the final hope of the Christian religion. He starts by describing the viewpoint of the Christians. He argues that until the time of Constantine, Christians “saw no outcome for the hopeless conflict of the new life with the old order except in some great cataclysm in which the existing world-order itself should be utterly destroyed and Christ should reign with his saints in a new heaven and a new earth.”[2] The rule of Constantine was then seen almost like a second coming of Christ, as his reign brought a union of the Byzantine Empire with Christianity.

Coleman goes on to recount the historiography of Constantine’s acceptance of Christianity. Some argued that he had been a Christian since the well-known victory over Maxentius in 312, others argued that he blasphemously continued to combine Christianity with paganism, and some argued that his move to Christianity was strictly a political maneuver. The author’s position on the matter is made clear when he moves to study the original evidence, Constantine’s laws. He remarks that the laws passed under Constantine “show a progressively favorable attitude toward the Christians.”[3]

Charles Odahl cites evidence to argue that Constantine’s conversion to Christianity was a political maneuver to gain momentum in a war with Maxentius in which his army was outnumbered. Their religious policies were polar opposites as Constantine had “broken from the tetrarchic policy of persecution and instead adopted a position of toleration in his domains” while Maxentius “followed the Galerian policy of persecution and lately intensified the program to revive paganism.”[4] While Constantine was outnumbered by the troops of Maxentius, he was a more popular ruler and field commander since Maxentius was known for “high rates of taxation, brutal means of repression, and the exiling of two bishops [which] led to declining popularity for Maxentius among both his pagan and Christian subjects.”[5]

Timothy Barnes makes a similar argument when explaining

Constantine's incentive to end persecution of Christians. After reviewing the tetrarchy and Galerius' ruthless persecution of Christianity, Barnes explains the brilliance of Constantine when "his first actions as emperor reveal his unerring astuteness in exploiting a political opportunity. The new Augustus at once decreed a formal end to the persecution of Christians in his domains." [6]

The political significance of his decision is the main feature of Barnes' attention and he further explains that, for Constantine, it "asserted his right to legislate for his own subjects, dissociated himself from the policies of his imperial colleagues, and proclaimed himself a potential liberator for persecuted Christians elsewhere." [7] His decision to free Christians had essentially made him a popular ruler who felt no problem with changing the dominant legislation in order to gain the support of his subjects and potential allies in the future.

Claiming that Constantine created a "stable consensus of Christians and pagans in favor of a religiously neutral public space," [8] H.A. Drake overlooked the sincerity of Constantine's conversion and moved on to instead discuss the debates Christians had over using their newly gained state powers to convert and gain greater influence over the Empire, a subject Drake claims has been buried under other concerns and topics. Information in Drake's account supports the idea that Christians were a much larger group than the commonly accepted "obscure new religion" that most seem to think fit Christianity before Constantine.

One of the most comprehensive studies of the Empire following Constantine down to Theodosius (and dwelling heavily on the reign of Theodosius) is *AD 381* by Charles Freeman. Freeman explains how the mild policies of Theodosius were later turned to favor Christianity by Ambrose, the bishop of Milan. He also discusses all the damage and fighting that came as a result of Theodosius' policies on paganism.

One of the most comprehensive works detailing the world into which Constantine was born and his rise to power is Paul Stephenson's *Constantine*. Stephenson starts by explaining that a true study of Constantine's rise to power would begin with the union of his father and mother and studying the circumstances of the Byzantine Empire where Constantine rose to success. Stephenson remarks that Constantine was born into "a world where his mother, a Christian convert, and his father, a pagan soldier, both of humble birth, could marry and rise to rule the empire." [9]

Stephenson's position on Constantine's conversion to Christianity is

a very unique idea that is new to the field. He argues that the growth of Christianity in the fourth century was not wholly driven by Constantine but that “its rise from minority cult to majority faith was driven by other factors, and Constantine’s life happened to coincide with that period when the growth curve went exponential.”[10] Continuing his theory, Stephenson points out that Constantinople wasn’t necessarily meant to be a Christian capital to replace Rome. Constantinople was a combination of pagan and Christian imagery and rites. Like the Roman emperors before him, Constantine wanted to be remembered as a great general and conqueror. His conversion to Christianity meant that instead of elevating himself to the level of a pagan god, he instead “considered himself, at various times, a new Alexander, a new Moses, and even a new Christ.”[11]

While Stephenson’s position is new to the field and the argument he makes is very convincing, it would be more complete if he took into account the effect paganism and the past idea of Roman emperorship played in the new Empire put together by Constantine. While Stephenson does dwell briefly on the idea, it can be argued that any move made by Constantine had elements of Rome’s pagan past tied in.

Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea

One of the few remaining primary sources documenting the rise and reign of Constantine comes from Eusebius who was the Bishop of Caesarea. Scholars have argued in the past whether Eusebius was simply Constantine’s official propagandist, some deny that he wrote the work credited with his name, and others are able to accept it as a legitimate primary source.[12] Regardless of how biased some scholars may believe he was, he is one of the only remaining sources who can give a detailed first-hand account of Constantine’s Empire.

Eusebius, in describing Constantine’s Empire, generally extols his accomplishment of converting the entire Empire to Christianity. In doing so, Eusebius sometimes overlooks Constantine’s aggressive military policy and the way his conquered territories worshipped him. While Eusebius argues that God had given Constantine everything that he won, Constantine acted more like a traditional Roman Emperor focused on his Empire and acted less than Christian in many circumstances. He also had a tendency to engage in self-aggrandizing behavior that put him on the same level with prophets and seers and claimed that God spoke to him and gave him visions on a regular

basis. While this was probably blasphemous to most Christians, Constantine probably saw it as a personal relationship with his Summus Deus,[13] one which he felt he deserved for his continued devotion.

As if to add to the glory God bestowed on Constantine, Eusebius includes a vague list of Constantine's military accomplishments. In his opinion, all the territory taken by Constantine is evidence of divine favor for the conquering Christian Emperor. Of Constantine's military victories, Eusebius remarks that he "campaign[ed] against the land of the Britons... He annexed the whole of the Scythian population... and once he had also extended his Empire in the extreme south as far as the Blemmyes and Aethiopians, he did not treat the acquisition of what lay in the orient as beyond his scope." [14] While Eusebius sees conquered territory as evidence of God's favor, it better shows a main focus of Constantine. While he did publicly thank Christ and God for his victories, Constantine was a military conqueror and wanted to be known for it like the ancient emperors of old who conquered in battle and expanded the Empire. The account of Eusebius shows that Constantine held military conquest as one of the major priorities throughout his reign.

Eusebius goes on to explain the way in which Constantine's newly conquered lands would worship him. The newly conquered kings and kingdoms "spontaneously saluted and greeted him, and sent their embassies with gifts and presents, and set such store by his acquaintance and friendship, that they honored him at home with pictures of him and dedications of statues, and alone of emperors Constantine was recognized and acclaimed by them all." [15] Many of the actions described above could fall in the category of worship. The statues dedicated to Constantine (and the pictures of him honored within the homes of his subjects) could easily be a euphemism for the worship of Constantine through idols. Though Eusebius probably saw everything done in Constantine's name as simple adoration, it seems to be very self-aggrandizing and Constantine accepted all of it.

As the emperor, Constantine not only claimed to have had a vision at the Battle of Milvian Bridge but professed continued revelation from the time his father was still in power to the end of his life. As a young man when accompanying his father, members of the aristocracy saw him as a potential threat and tried to have him killed but "when once and again the plotting were with God-given insight detected by him, he sought safety in flight, in this also preserving his likeness to

the great prophet Moses.”[16] As an emperor, Eusebius claims that Constantine “often vouchsafed manifestations of deity, when divine visions were miraculously displayed to him and provided him with all sorts of foreknowledge of future events.”[17] In making these claims, Eusebius has elevated Constantine beyond the level of the first Christian Emperor and added the title of seer.

In an attempt to make himself look even more like a prophet, Constantine used to regularly have a “tent-chapel” constructed which he brought with him while campaigning and “like Moses, he would ‘rush from the tabernacle, and give orders to his army to move at once, and draw their swords’; victory always followed.”[18] He did this to assure his men that he was indeed speaking with God as Moses did in a tent pitched away from the encampment in ancient Israel.[19] While the ties to Christianity and Judaism are clear, many Christians and Jews would probably find it offensive that Constantine thought that he, like Moses, could receive revelation directly from God like Moses. The fact that victory always followed, however, could be seen in the ancient Roman tradition that what Constantine was doing was divinely sanctioned. Eusebius also claimed that anyone carrying the cross as the standard-bearer for Constantine’s army was immune to weapons and could not be killed.[20]

Overall, Constantine’s attitude toward paganism, though he claimed to find it repulsive, was one of acceptance. In a letter Constantine sent to the provincials, he addressed everyone when he said “may none molest another; may each retain what his soul desires, and practice it” and concerning pagans he added “those who hold themselves back, let them keep if they wish their sanctuaries of falsehood.”[21] His attitude toward pagans seems to be one of tolerance and he even condemned his enemies to “the pits of Acheron,” a Greek version of hell, instead of condemning them to a Christian hell.[22] His remarks also seem to be directed mainly against polytheistic pagans, not ones who had accepted Christ as a Summus Dues, or monotheistic pagans.

Christianity on the Rise and the Evolution of Paganism

Some attention needs to be given to Christianity which was on the rise during the time of Constantine and the developments that led to Constantine’s desire to merge it with paganism and traditional Roman beliefs. Even prior to Constantine, however, paganism and Christianity evolved to a point where they shared a similar background of

underlying stories and symbolism.

A change to the Christian religion came when the role of bishop started to change. Bishops were, initially, limited in authority and usually an “overseer” or “bookkeeper.”[23] Drake points out that by the time of Constantine, bishops had taken a more authoritative role as “the leader and spokesperson for his community.”[24] The leadership of the bishops is what allowed Christianity to grow faster; it allowed for the structural organization that paganism had lacked. Constantine (and later Julian) realized that a structured organization with the Emperor at the head would give the Emperor even greater power over the Empire.

The idea that Christians were a minor religion or an obscure cult that Constantine brought to prominence by making it the official state religion is false. Constantine was taking over a religion that he knew already had a strong standing within the Empire and was growing at an exponential rate. Drake notes that Christians “may have numbered as many as six million members [by the time of Constantine]... upwards of 10 percent of the entire population of the empire.”[25] An attempt was recently made by Rodney Stark to quantify the number of Christians that existed from 40-350 A.D. Stark estimates (and gives reasons why) that Christianity from the year 40 saw a growth of about 40% per decade.[26] This means that, taking the assumption of a 10% Christian Empire in the year 300, Christians were five times larger in 350 as they were in the year 300.[27] Interestingly enough, Christians in the year 300 were about five times as numerous as they were in the year 250, which means that Christianity had already begun a massive growth trend by the time Constantine became Emperor.

The obvious limitation on Stark’s study comes from the fact that very little numerical data is available from the early years of Christianity. The data that is available, in many cases, can’t be fully trusted or seems to be exaggerated. He does, however, find an interesting parallel between his predictions for the growth of Christianity and the actual growth numbers experienced by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (for which the data is fully available). Both churches saw an increase of about 40% per decade (if Stark’s predictions concerning the early Christian church are correct). [28]

Christianity was spreading most vehemently among the commoners of the Eastern Roman Empire. Drake explains that “the common people, stunned by the virtue of the martyrs, convert in massive

numbers to the new faith, which in turn gives them the courage to rise against their oppressors and establish both Christianity and democracy in a single, economical revolt.”[29] Within these communities of mostly common people, a bishop was generally an educated man among them designated as their leader and the organization of Christianity was started with a loose network of strong bishops.

As Christianity expanded and evolved, paganism did as well. Christian missionaries and leaders noticed that as both religions evolved “one result was that Christians and pagans in the late second and third centuries developed a large vocabulary of shared symbolism.”[30] While pagans looked to a supreme sun god, generally Sol or Helios, Christians could reference their belief in the god of the Old Testament with titles such as “Sun of Righteousness.”[31]

During the time immediately preceding Constantine, paganism adapted to be more of a monotheistic form of paganism as well. The old pantheon of gods was condensed to a single god with many different names. In this way, the “Summus Deus” could be a personable god who interacted with and helped mortals. A great example of this comes from *Metamorphoses* written by Apuleius sometime in the second century A.D. In the story of Lucius, the protagonist attempts to turn himself into a bird using magic. He casts a spell that ends up turning him into a donkey instead. Isis, in the end, intervenes to turn him back into a human and Lucius joins the cult of Isis out of gratitude. In this story, Isis represents the “Summus Deus” and describes herself as “the single manifestation of all gods and goddesses that are... though I am worshipped in many aspects, known by countless names, and propitiated with all manner of different rites, yet the whole round earth venerates me.”[32] Even in accepting Christ as the most powerful god, Constantine was, in effect, announcing Christ to be his “Summus Deus” or his manifestation of the Supreme God. In doing so, Constantine was within right to combine any elements of pagan worship into his personal worship and to receive direct revelation from his personal Summus Deus when going into battle.

After establishing a general common ground, Christian missionaries would attempt to teach pagans within the framework of paganism. While effective, Drake notes that it may have harmed the church at first since “many of the early heresies can be fruitfully studied as efforts at apologetics gone awry.”[33] The pagan converts did bring something vital to the Christian religion as new converts, Drake notes

that “without the apologists’ effort in these early centuries to reconcile contradictory elements in their faith with the tenets of pagan philosophy, it is highly doubtful that Christianity ever would have developed the capacity for abstract, intellectual discourse that made it a world religion.”[34]

The time leading up to the reign of Constantine brought a stronger, organized Christianity that had begun a merger with paganism in some ways. Constantine arrived at the Emperorship perfectly ready to further the merger and become a stabilizing force in the Roman Empire. His toleration of both pagans and Christians is what ultimately made him such a successful Emperor.

The Council of Nicaea

As Emperor and self-appointed head of the church, Constantine felt well within his rights to call together all bishops to councils over which he presided in 325 A.D. It has been said in the past that the reason for the Council of Nicaea was to come to agreement on a few points: the debate over whether Christ was created of matter by the Father, the proper day to observe Easter, and to put an end to the various fights and excommunications prevalent in Africa. While these points were addressed, Constantine’s primary reason in calling the Council of Nicaea was to establish his dominance over the bishops and over the church of Christ.

Constantine first addressed the problems in Africa by sending a letter to Alexander and Arius. Eusebius makes an observation in his account that Constantine finally decided to hold a council when “desperate men, out of their minds, were committing sacrilegious acts, even daring to insult the images of the Emperor.”[35] While Eusebius claims that Constantine was not brought to anger by this, but instead by the fighting within the church, the fact remains that the Council of Nicaea was called only *after* images of Constantine had been insulted.

Stephenson also explains that while Eusebius simply gives a figure of more than 250 bishops in attendance, “tradition holds there were 318, corresponding to the number of Abraham’s servants at Genesis 14.”[36] We again see Constantine attempting to draw a parallel between his life and that of a great prophet. Constantine had invited 318 bishops to his council over which he presided, just as Abraham presided over his 318 servants.

The only record of the actual council is recorded in Eusebius and nothing of the actual council is relevant to the current topic. The after

effects of the council, however, show Constantine's true belief concerning himself and his position in the church. After being excommunicated and then reinstated to his position, Arius wrote to Constantine demanding that Athanasius (successor of Alexander) be removed from his position. Arius and Athanasius disputed whether the Father and the Son were both made of the same substance or if the Son was a creation of the Father and, therefore, inferior to Him. Arius and his followers argued that the Father and the Son were made of different substance while Athanasius and his followers argued that the Father and the Son were made of the same substance and, therefore, equals. Stephenson sums up a point relevant to Constantine's general character as evidenced by his response to Arius. "Constantine... took counsel from his subordinates but made the decisions himself and gave orders that none were permitted to countermand. Military discipline was predicated on recognition of the commander's absolute authority, which was reinforced by codified acts of violence. Ultimately, acts of insubordination, if sufficiently egregious, were punishable by death." [37] Constantine, after receiving the demands of Arius, called him "the mouthpiece of Satan" and made any harboring of his books a crime punishable by death. [38]

Laws of Constantine

According to Coleman, Constantine had two distinct phases of law-making. The first were his laws from about 313-321 A.D. These laws tended to be in support of both pagans and Christians with very few signs of favoritism. It makes sense that Constantine would want to be universally liked at this time since he had not yet defeated Licinius to become the sole ruler of the Empire. The second period, covering 323-336 A.D., shows many more pro-Christian laws. While he never officially outlawed paganism, Christians were benefited much more than pagans in the laws he passed after his victory over Licinius. [39]

Constantine is probably best known for the Edict of Milan passed in 313 A.D. After removing the penalties imposed on Christians and allowing them freedom to worship, the edict goes on to say "we have also conceded to other religions the right of open and free observance of their worship for the sake of the peace of our times, that each one may have the free opportunity to worship as he pleases; this regulation is made so that we may not seem to detract from any dignity or any religion." [40] While many focus on the fact that Christians were freed from persecution by the Edict of Milan, it

granted equal freedom to all other religions including paganism. Constantine's policies, while he gradually passed more and more laws that favored Christianity, were generally tolerant of pagans.

A few more laws were passed that slightly benefited Christians in 320 A.D. and 321 A.D. As this isn't a comprehensive study of all the laws passed during Constantine's reign, a paraphrase of those laws will suffice. The laws had to do with inheritances and wills and it basically added the clergy to the list of those able to inherit. It also allowed people to leave bequests to the Catholic Church.[41]

The next law relevant to the church as a whole was passed in 321 A.D. and it elevated Sunday to the level of a pagan holiday. The new law "suspend[ed] the work of the courts and of the city population on that day, agricultural work, as was usual, being expressly excepted." [42] While this seems to be in favor of Christians, it should be remembered that Christians and pagans shared in many of their traditions. Coleman sums it up best: "These laws were not positively Christian or pagan, nor are they necessarily ambiguous to the emperor's religious position. The worship of the sun, "*sol invictus*," and the observance of Sunday were integral parts of Mithraism and the religion of the Great Mother generally. The laws, therefore, might have been issued by a worshipper of the sun." [43] While Constantine's designation of Sunday as a day of rest doesn't necessarily favor the pagans (though some have accused Constantine of being a worshipper of Sol Invictus) it doesn't favor Christians, either. It was a law that was beneficial to almost everyone throughout the Empire at the time.

Another example of Constantine passing laws beneficial to both Christians and pagans comes from his policies concerning magic and divination. While they seemingly benefit pagans in this case, Christians were known in some cases to resort to magic as well so these laws protected both groups. Coleman explains "it was only the privacy of consulting of haruspices [44] and the practice of magic arts against chastity or life, or for other harmful purposes that were forbidden. Rites whose object was to prevent disease and drought were not prohibited." [45]

While Constantine's laws definitely began to favor Christians and grant them special privileges after the defeat of Licinius, there are a couple of things to keep in mind. First, most of the extreme laws that Eusebius and Jerome, the early church historians, claim were passed under the reign of Constantine are not backed up by original documents. [46] At best, we have copies that weren't written by

Constantine or we have to take Eusebius and Jerome at their word (which may be exaggerated as they had a vested interest in exaggerating). Coleman does admit, however, that the laws from this time period “show at least an anti-pagan tendency, in the light of which the statements of these three authorities must be interpreted as, at most, exaggerations and not utter misstatements.”[47]

The second thing to remember is that not all the laws passed by Constantine during this time harmed paganism, some of them simply gave extra benefits and perks to Christians, especially the clergy. For instance, in 326 A.D. Constantine passed a law which allowed Christian bishops to act as judges in court cases and their decisions were legal and binding. The law also “created episcopal courts with far-reaching powers, parallel to, and independent of, the secular courts.”[48] While this didn’t necessarily harm paganism, and pagans could also bring their cases before the bishops, it mostly just increased the power of the church and gave an added benefit to all Christians.

The final thing to keep in mind when reviewing laws from this time period is that many of the laws had to do with humane treatment of people, morality, and doing away with customs that didn’t really link to Christianity or paganism (gladiator battles, for example). While these laws were inspired by Christian teachings, they didn’t benefit Christians anymore than pagans. Coleman provides another great example. “Branding of criminals, for instance, was to be upon the hand, so that the face, made in the image of heavenly beauty, should not be marred.”[49]

When the sum of all of Constantine’s laws is taken together, there may be a slight advantage, as far as benefits and privileges go, in favor of the Christians. Overall, however, Constantine didn’t issue many laws that were specifically directed at harming pagans or paganism. Pagans were generally allowed to continue as they had been. Stephenson points out that, in many cases, punishments given to heretics of the church were far worse than anything done to pagans. [50]

Constantine’s Death and Deification

While the exact cause of Constantine’s death is unknown, he fell ill while embarking on a campaign against the Persians. He died May 22, 337.[51] The circumstances of his death aren’t an integral part of identifying his policies, beliefs, or the type of Empire he built. It is interesting to note what happened immediately following his death as

it emphasizes a pagan ritual that was still in practice.

Stephenson, paraphrasing Eusebius, notes that “Constantine’s body was stripped of its white robes and dressed once again in purple and gold. His corpse was transported in a gilded coffin to Constantinople, and there it lay in state in the imperial palace, wearing a diadem, to receive clients who came, as in life, every morning to pay their respects to the most powerful patron in the Roman world.”[52] Casting aside all notions of poverty and humility, Constantine was brought back to Constantinople like the Romans Emperors of old, a military commander who brought prestige to the Empire. Constantine was still the Empire’s ruler, even in death, until his sons all made it to Constantinople. Laws were passed in his name up to three months after his death.[53]

Stephenson also explains an ancient rite that occurred when an Emperor died and was succeeded by his sons. The Empire had many short ruling Emperors preceding Constantine’s reign and it was the first of such ceremonies in a long time. The ceremony is called apotheosis and it is basically the deification of the ruler.[54] Stephenson, after describing the arrangement of four separate storeys, explains “the fourth storey houses a caged eagle which is released when the pyre is set alight. “The eagle flies forth, soaring with the flames into the sky; the Romans believe that this eagle carries the soul of the emperor from the earth up to heaven. Thereafter the emperor is worshipped with the rest of the gods.”[55]

While Eusebius gives the only account of the funeral and he is obviously determined to make it sound as Christian as possible, Stephenson is convinced that Constantine received the rite of apotheosis. He cites as evidence the coins that were minted for Constantine’s death which show a quadriga[56] ascending into heaven (much like Elijah, but the symbol was also associated with Mithras and Sol Invictus).[57] Stephenson goes on to say “the bishops would have had no control over how the army honored its dead Augustus, so Eusebius explained away the rites, witnessed by thousands, which might have troubled Christians.”[58]

All of this happened after Constantine had died, so it may be argued that his final wishes were not for deification or apotheosis. If this was the case, Constantine probably would have told one of the bishops that he wanted a Christian burial. Above all else, however, Constantine was a military commander and he wanted to be recognized as such. Constantine, therefore, probably saw no problem

with deification after his death as he met all the old Roman requirements and he had come to see himself, in the end, as more than a prophet (like the parallels he drew between his life and that of Moses, Abraham, and Elijah) but as a Christ and a god.

Constantine the Christ Emperor

The evidence has already been presented to show that Constantine thought of himself as another Moses, Abraham, and Elijah. Stephenson goes further to suggest that Constantine thought of himself as a second Christ. While he had failed to be baptized in the River Jordan[59], as Christ was, Eusebius stops at many points in his account to compare Constantine with Christ himself.

Even the location of his burial suggests his superiority to the original Twelve Apostles, as his sarcophagus rests in the center of the Twelve[60] in the former Church of the Holy Apostles.[61] Stephenson notes that “later authors would suggest that Constantine was *isoapostolos*, ‘equal to the apostles.’ But this was a conception of the fifth century. It was clear to Eusebius in the fourth that Constantine considered himself not as follower, but leader: he had positioned his sarcophagus in the place of Christ.”[62]

While the sincerity of Constantine’s conversion to Christianity has been questioned in the past, it should be noted that Constantine firmly believed that he saw a vision of a cross made of light in the sky with ‘By this conquer’ attached. Eusebius writes that “if someone else had reported it, it would perhaps not be easy to accept; but since the victorious Emperor himself told the story to the present writer a long while after, when I was privileged with his acquaintance and company, and confirmed it with oaths, who could hesitate to believe the account, especially when the time which followed provided evidence for the truth of what he said?”[63] Constantine did, however, accept Christ in a way that other Emperors of the past had accepted supreme gods. He continued the tradition of the mystical worship of the Emperor even when bringing the Empire to tolerate Christianity. He saw his devotion to Christ as justifying an elevation of his status to a prophet and, eventually, to a being like Christ Himself. It also can’t be denied that while the authenticity of his visions while on military campaigns is questionable, he always lead his troops to victory whenever they followed his directions and rushed to battle after he had received a vision.

Julian the Apostate

Following the death of Constantine in 337 A.D., the Empire was inherited by his three sons: Constantine II (337-340), Constans (337-350), and Constantius II (337-361). When Constantine II died in battle, Constans and Constantius divided the Empire into East and West each ruling as an Augustus. When Constans was overthrown in 350 A.D. by a usurper named Magnentius in the west, Odahl explains “Constantius defeated him in a civil war, and then ruled as sole Augustus until his demise (350-61), but employed his surviving younger cousins Gallus (351-54) and Julian (355-63) as Caesars to assist him.”[64] Following the death of his cousin in 361 A.D., Julian became the sole Augustus until his death in 363 A.D.

Julian, as an admitted pagan, sought to return the Empire to paganism. There were three main reasons that Julian wasn’t successful in returning the Empire to paganism. First, Julian never had the charisma of Constantine.[65] Glanville Downey in his article discussing Julian’s arrival at Antioch points out “though at first received enthusiastically by the Antiochenes, Julian quickly lost favor with the mixed and tumultuous population of the city. His ascetic and remote personality did not appeal to the pleasure-loving populace.”[66]

The second reason Julian wasn’t successful in his return to paganism was that the populace of the Empire was largely Christian by that point. For years Constantine and his sons had added privilege upon privilege to the Christians and used imperial funds to build up Christian churches. The Empire wanted a return to Christianity and when his short reign ended in 363 while “on a Persian campaign, the army proclaimed the Christian Jovian to replace him.”[67]

That ties in well with the third main reason that Julian was unsuccessful in bringing back paganism. While his attempt was modeled after Constantine’s turn to Christianity, as Julian openly admitted he would allow for toleration of all religions, his reign was only from 361-363 A.D. Two years isn’t enough time to combat years of government support of Christianity. He might have had more success had his reign extended for a longer period of time.

Julian was, however, smart enough to realize the reasons behind Constantine’s success. He came to be an admirer of the organizational structure of the Christian church. In one of his letters, he even “demanded of his priesthood that they follow the methods of the Christian priests, since the new ‘Hellenic’ religion had not prospered

as he wished, and he laid the blame on the negligence of its professors.”[68] Downey furthers the idea by saying “having once been nominally a Christian, Julian was familiar with the care which was taken to train Christian priests, and to provide them with apologetic and instructional material; and he saw the need for paganism, which possessed no organization or hierarchy such as Christianity did, to be provided with adequate means for encountering Christian teaching.”[69]

Also showing that Julian understood the role that religious toleration played in Constantine’s success, Downey explains “there were different stages in Julian’s campaign, beginning with an effort to secure general religious toleration and to re-establish paganism (including a program to reform and reorganize pagan religion), and only later, when this initial effort began to seem unsuccessful, did the emperor pass into open warfare on Christianity.”[70]

Theodosius the Overzealous

The other radical departure from Constantine’s policy of freedom of religion came a few Emperors after Julian during the reign of Theodosius (379-395). The evidence actually suggests that Theodosius started out his reign with the idea of continuing the practice of tolerance set down by Constantine but soon turned to persecuting not only pagans, but all non-Christians.

Problems first arose when Theodosius dealt with the destruction of a Jewish synagogue in Callinicum on the Euphrates in 388 A.D. A Christian mob led by a bishop had completely demolished the synagogue and the governor wrote to Theodosius to ask for advice. [71] Theodosius initially told the governor to make the Christian bishop bear the financial burden of destroying the synagogue. Ambrose, the bishop of Milan and a confidant of the Emperor (who had made suggestions to the Emperor in the past), advised him that his “Christian duty” was to take a different course.[72] “Reparation, he argued, would involve asking the bishop to betray his faith, and if the bishop refused there would be more trouble, which would bring the risk of a Christian emperor creating new martyrs.”[73] Theodosius was apparently convinced as he sent another letter to the governor reversing his previous decision.

Theodosius once again returned to religious toleration and was even able to gain favor with the mostly pagan Senate and enjoy an era of peace. Theodosius didn’t decide to wage war against the pagans

until February 391, when he issued a law that “no one is to stain themselves with sacrifices... no one is to enter shrines, no one is to undertake the ritual purification of temples or worship images crafted by human hands.”[74] He became the first Emperor to actually *ban* paganism and its practices. While there were some countermeasures installed briefly to pacify the militant Christians in their assault on paganism, Theodosius followed up this law in November 392 with a law that banned “any activity associated with pagan rites... [and] any symbol of paganism, even in domestic shrines... The pagan gods were reclassified as evil spirits. Local officials were given widespread powers to enter homes to search out offending material.”[75] This law brought about the first time that pagan practices were banned *and* officials were given the task of searching out offenders.

Things intensified until 394, when the pagans, led by Arbogast, met Theodosius and his army at the river Frigidus near Aquileia to battle. [76] While his troops were initially repelled, Theodosius emerged as the victor. Persecution may have intensified had Theodosius not died the following year in 395. Freeman argues that the main problem with Theodosius as Emperor was that he “created a general climate of opinion within which highly-placed Christian extremists, whether bishops or court officials, could act virtually uncontrolled.”[77] In the end, Theodosius’ persecution of pagans and his inability to put high-ranking Christians in their place (i.e. Ambrose) led to civil war.

Conclusion

Constantine seems to have wanted to be a good Christian and was only hindered by his desire to build himself up with Christ and the church. The smartest tactic he employed, however, was that of tolerance. He allowed pagans to continue as they had and simply promoted Christians to positions of power. Even among the bishops, however, Constantine still saw himself as the ruler of the church.

Constantine’s era of tolerance was only interrupted by Julian, who tried to revert back to a more organized and structured form of paganism, and Theodosius, who actually went to war against the pagans and passed laws banning their ability to worship. Both the exceptions of Julian and Theodosius ended badly for the overall interests of the Empire.

Future scholarship would be beneficial with a more detailed analysis of the laws and policies passed by Constantine, Julian, and Theodosius. An exhaustive analysis would return stronger proof that

Constantine's Empire of tolerance was the stable path of the Empire and chaos resulted when anyone diverted from it. Other Emperors laws and regulations could also be studied with a comparison to that of Constantine's also including an analysis of civil wars and rebellions to measure relative peace and stability.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Randall Morris has a bachelors degree in history from BYU and enjoys writing history articles, travel / photo books, and action / adventure fiction. He spent two years in the Philippines as a missionary and speaks fluent Tagalog. He has worked in the IT field for over seven years. His works are currently available as ebooks, paperbacks, and audio books. Morris has been a self-published author since early 2012.

Feel free to contact me:

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/RandyMorrisAuthor>

Twitter: @RandallJMorris

Blog: <http://randyjmorris.blogspot.com/>

Email: randallmorrisauthor@gmail.com

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- [3] Christopher Coleman, *Constantine the Great and Christianity* (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 26.
- [4] Charles Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 98.
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- [7] Timothy David Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 28.
- [8] H.A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), xv.
- [9] Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor* (London: Quercus Books, 2009), 5.
- [10] Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor* (London: Quercus Books, 2009), 5.
- [11] Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor* (London: Quercus Books, 2009), 6.
- [12] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*. Edited by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), v.
- [13] “Summus Deus” was the chief or head god among monotheistic pagans. Further explanation of Christ as Constantine’s “Summus Deus” will be given in the section entitled “Christianity on the Rise and the Evolution of Paganism.”
- [14] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*. Edited by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 70.
- [15] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*. Edited by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 70.
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- [19] KJV Bible, Exodus 33:7.

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- [26] Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 6-7.
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- [32] Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*. 11.4. as quoted in H.A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 137.
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[38] Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor* (London: Quercus Books, 2009), 274.

[39] Coleman includes a general explanation of Constantine's laws from 313-336 A.D. in his book *Constantine the Great and Christianity*. His discussion of Constantine's laws can be found on pgs. 25-45.

[40] Translated in University of Pennsylvania. Dept. of History: *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European history*, (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press [1897-1907]), Vol 4:, 1, pp. 28-30. This text is in the public domain.

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[42] Christopher Coleman, *Constantine the Great and Christianity* (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 32-33.

[43] Christopher Coleman, *Constantine the Great and Christianity* (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 33.

[44] A haruspex (pl. haruspices) was a man who studied the entrails of sacrificed animals for divination and fortune-telling. They were common throughout the early Roman Empire and some must have still existed during the time of Constantine. For more information, visit <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haruspex>.

[45] Christopher Coleman, *Constantine the Great and Christianity* (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 35-36.

[46] Christopher Coleman, *Constantine the Great and Christianity* (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 38.

[47] Christopher Coleman, *Constantine the Great and Christianity* (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 39.

[48] *Codex of Theodosianus*, i, 27, 1 (June 23, * * *) as quoted in Christopher Coleman, *Constantine the Great and Christianity* (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 41.

[49] *Codex of Theodosianus*, ii, 8, 1 (321); iv, 7, 1 (321); iv, 8, 5 (322), and 6 (323) as quoted in Christopher Coleman, *Constantine the Great and Christianity* (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 43.

[50] Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor* (London: Quercus Books, 2009), 271.

[51] Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor* (London: Quercus Books, 2009), 281.

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- [54] Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor* (London: Quercus Books, 2009), 285.
- [55] Herodian, *History of the Roman Empire*. Book IV, 2:11. as quoted in Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor* (London: Quercus Books, 2009), 285.
- [56] A horse-drawn chariot with four horses. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quadriga>.
- [57] Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor* (London: Quercus Books, 2009), 286.
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- [61] Mehmet II had the Faith Mosque built in 1461 on top of the remains of the Church of the Holy Apostles. See <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/turkey/istanbul-church-of-holy-apostles.htm> for more information.
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- [73] Charles Freeman, *AD 381* (London: Pimlico, 2008), 118.
- [74] Charles Freeman, *AD 381* (London: Pimlico, 2008), 122. For the measures taken against pagans, Freeman draws from Friell and Williams, *Theodosius: The Empire at Bay*, Chapter 6.
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Constantine: The Emperor of Tolerance

Randall Morris

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